

## Against the Grain

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# Issues in Vendor/Library Relations - Blackwell's

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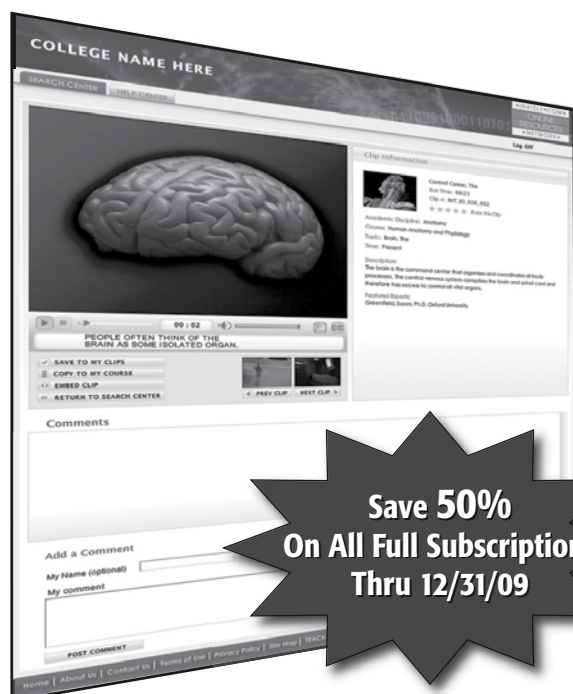
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## Issues in Vendor/Library Relations — Blackwell's

Column Editor: **Bob Nardini** (Group Director, Client Integration and Head Bibliographer, Coutts Information Services) <[bnardini@couttsinfo.com](mailto:bnardini@couttsinfo.com)>

Years ago when I was new in this business on one of my early trips out of the **Yankee Book Peddler** office I connected through Nashville, probably on the way to Chattanooga. Airlines then used those colored strips of stiff paper to route your baggage and when I picked up my suitcase I was startled for a moment to see it tagged "BNA."

That's the airport code for Nashville, but it would be hard today to convey to anyone who's more recently come of age in the library business the weight of those three letters in the mid-1980s in the mind of a new rep traveling out of Contoocook, New Hampshire on behalf of a small competitor of "**Blackwell North America**," as that company was then known. I kept the tag, as a kind of talisman.

Now I live in Nashville and **Blackwell's** is gone, or will be soon on this continent and others, acquired the week before last by **YBP**, as that company is now known. **BNA** had its start in 1975, when the UK firm **Blackwell's** bought parts of the failing **Richard Abel Company**, which over the prior decade or so had revolutionized academic bookselling in North America through innovations such as the approval plan. Before long **BNA** was the dominant academic library bookseller in the

United States, not to mention most other parts of the western world.

The **Blackwell's** business goes back to 1879, when the famous and eponymous bookshop in Oxford opened up with "an inventory of just 700 books," according to the current **Blackwell's** Website. How many times in how many library offices over these past decades did I look at color photographs of that bookshop, or of the **Bodleian Library**, framed in a **Blackwell's** calendar hanging on the wall behind someone's desk? Can't count. Years before ever setting foot in it I felt as if I knew that bookshop. One of my sons, at age twelve or so, took a trip to the U.K. with a friend. When he came back, he told me he'd seen the store owned by the "bad guys."

I didn't know what he meant, not for a moment anyway. They weren't "bad guys," of course, although I guess years of my shop talk at home must have pegged them for him as "the bad guys" from my particular seat. In my very first months at **Yankee**, when I was strictly an inside guy, I remember our losing two accounts to **BNA**, **Brandeis** and **Auburn**, because we couldn't supply weekly deliveries of cataloging records on tape. **Blackwell's** could. Then when I began to travel, in a hurry I learned all

about **MARC** tapes, about "the thesaurus," about "subject-based" approval plans, and about U.K. publishers beyond the big ones like **Oxford**, **Cambridge**, **Routledge**, and a few others.

At **Yankee** we learned how to talk about all these things and we developed services to match as we could. I still remember a delicate customer service issue from the time, now an historical footnote, which was figuring out polite ways to suggest to customers that they might want to promptly return the tapes we sent them each week, so that we'd have enough tapes on hand to send them their next batch of **MARC** records. Those big round plastic cases housing spooled tape fitted easily into boxes of books, resting snugly on top of the books when the box was taped; but when libraries neglected to return their stash of them, we'd run short.

**Blackwell's** seemed to have the edge on everything in those days. They had so many customers. It was hard to set foot inside an

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academic library in the U.S. that didn't somehow do business with **Blackwell's**. Their conference receptions and hospitality suites were legendary. They had veteran reps you heard about all the time. A few years into my career they had an online database for customers to order their books. Later, they had tables-of-contents. And they always had that thesaurus, which subdivided so many subjects into so many parts.

But above all they had England. The name itself, **Blackwell "North America"** said that the United States and Canada were outposts of a sort. England was home base, and not merely England, Oxford, where the **Blackwell's** bookshop and its neighbor across the street the **Bodleian** were a pair of world institutions. At **Yankee John Secor** used to say, only half joking I think, that maybe we needed to buy a cottage on Lake Winnepesaukee to counter the **Blackwell** custom of offering hospitality to visiting American librarians at the family estate, known to us only as "the castle." How many American professors had visited Oxford, had spent hours in the bookshop? Once more, can't count. How many were comforted to know that their own library bought books from **Blackwell's**?

One whose library didn't — this was my customer, and so his library's books were bought in New Hampshire — a professor of English History and even a journal editor in the field who taught at a remote state university campus, used to write an annual memo to the University Librarian arguing that the library should throw us out and bring back **Blackwell's**, whom we had displaced to his everlasting frustration. Each year on my visits we'd face off, I'd hear all about **Blackwell's**, and the memo would follow.

I'm sure this unlucky historian would rather have been conducting seminars at **Yale** or **Princeton** than on the campus where he did

teach, but at least there'd been **Blackwell's** before he'd gotten stuck with me. Meanwhile, we'd displaced **Blackwell's** on quite a few other campuses. Their reps came to seem not so formidable. In fact through mutual curiosity we got to know them, and they got to know us, at conferences over drinks. A tavern on King Street in Charleston, now gone, was a notable venue for these summits, where it was impossible not to get awfully friendly as we caught up on industry gossip and exchanged our best tales about customers and about other vendor reps who didn't happen to be present.

One time at a Charleston reception, as I stood with **Dan Halloran**, **Blackwell's** president at the time, a mutual librarian-friend walked up to ask what we were talking about. "We're fixing prices," I said. How we wished we could have. This must have been almost ten years ago, but it was clear even then as we fought for accounts in contests that frequently established new discount thresholds and higher service bars too, that our industry was spiraling in an unhealthy direction. Smaller companies were the first to pay the price. In the U.S., **Blackwell's** acquired **Ballen** and then **Academic**, and in the U.K., **Heffers** and then **W.H. Everett**. **Everett**, until that sale, in 2003, referred to themselves as the world's oldest independent bookseller, founded as they were in 1793 and until the end embedding an image of **St. Paul's Cathedral** in their logo. **YBP**, in the meantime, had picked up **Lindsay & Howes** in 1998, and so finally had a U.K. foothold.

It became difficult not to think about **Blackwell's** as librarians so often had. Friendships were common across company lines and respect grew in both directions. I'll always remember a boss telling me, once we'd begun to seriously challenge them and were feeling maybe a bit too cocky, "They're a good company, believe me. They've survived world wars. They survived a depression." At some point I visited the Oxford bookshop myself, and so had my own fine memories of time spent browsing the shop's aisles and then, in a warm pub just

doors away, inspecting the purchases.

So when the news broke recently, partly it was something everyone thought about in a business way, but partly in the vendor world it seemed a family affair too, one affecting friends. The phone calls and emails and conversations among people who'd been there across the years, in one way or another, began at once and haven't stopped. The other day I was talking to **Wendell Lotz**, now my colleague at **Ingram**, who reminisced that he'd gotten his start in the business at **Baker & Taylor** by being put in charge of transferring into the **B&T** approval system the profiles of libraries who were caught when **Richard Abel** went under. In turn I reminisced to **Wendell** that when **YBP** was acquired by **B&T**, I'd been put in charge of a group transferring the remaining **B&T** profiles — most libraries had switched companies by then, but a lot of small to medium sized profiles were still active — into the **YBP** system. No doubt I'd had my hands on some of **Wendell's** profiles.

What does it mean? is the question everyone gets to at some point, us book vendors and no doubt librarians too in their conversations, as we all assess the new landscape whereby **Baker & Taylor**, the leader prior to **Blackwell's**, now dominates the U.S. market again, and far more than ever before, via the new **YBP**, whose U.K. foothold **Lindsay & Howes** — renamed some time ago as a by-product of an earlier acquisition — **Lindsay & Croft**, is now swapped to **Blackwell's**. A couple of lessons, at least, are clear enough. One is that nothing stays the same for too long. Last month at a library whose account my present company, **Coutts**, had just won, one of the collections coordinators asked a member of the vendor selection committee, "Why didn't you choose **Blackwell's**?" A week later, **Blackwell's** was history. Which brings up the other lesson about the business of library bookselling: While the playing field may be the offices and meeting rooms of academic libraries, this is one tough game. 🐾

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## As I See It! — Impact Factors and Usage Factors: Testing Alternative Metrics

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The conventional measure of a journal's "quality" is the Impact Factor, devised by **Dr. Eugene Garfield** as an indicator to scientists of the relative merits of journals in their chosen area of research. It is a ratio of number of citations in a given year to articles published in the journal in the prior two years. Impact Factors are calculated each year and published by **Thomson Reuters** in its *Journal Citation Reports*.

Impact Factors are used as a measure of quality or research impact. They are now

used in ways that were never envisaged when **Dr. Garfield's** simple guide for scientists was first formulated. Research grants, tenure and promotion are judged on measures that include the Impact Factors of the journals in which the candidate has published. Governments base their assessments of the quality of individual university research outputs on Impact Factors as well as peer review of published research. Libraries base collection development in part of the Impact Factors of journals in the collection or being considered for acquisition.

Authors want to publish only in journals with a high Impact Factor, which now assumes an importance as a shorthand measure of quality that was never intended, and which it should not have to bear.

It must also be said that **Thomson Reuter's** selection of journals for indexing and citation analysis is heavily biased to STM — science, technology and medicine. Its coverage of the humanities and social sciences is much less comprehensive.

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